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ABSTRACT

The first stage of a three-stage speech placement test that can be used by individual campuses of the University of Wisconsin is discussed in this paper. The following applications of this speech theory test are described first: to exempt students from the basic communication course, to place students in an appropriate communication course, or to demonstrate competency. The paper. then focuses on administration of the two 42-item placement tests for public speaking and interpersonal communication, and on joint administration of these tests. The paper also points out that, although four different methods of taking the test have been developed, it is necessary to work individually with faculty on each campus to develop a set of guidelines for interpreting test scores; that it will be imperative to continually update and secure the tests; and that the use of this test provides the University of Wisconsin system with a consistent and accurate gauge of student readiness for learning in the area of communication. (DF)

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"The Use of Paper and Pencil Testing In a Statewide Placement Testing Program"

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The University of Wisconsin System is seeking to develop a three-stage placement test which can be utilized by individual campuses to exempt students from the basic communication course, to place students in an appropriate communication course, or for demonstration of competency. Phase I will be a paper and pencil test of competence in both public address and interpersonal communication theory. Successful completion of Phase I will entitle a student to essay Phase II, which consists of theory questions from videotape-stimulus and an oral performance examination Phase III. This paper will discuss the projected application of the theory-based examination on the campuses of the U.W. System.

VARIATION IN APPLICATION

There are three applications for this battery of tests being considered within the University of Wisconsin System:

A - Placement of students in appropriate courses in the affected discipline.

B - Waiver/Exemption of the student from required courses, either in the major or in the core curriculum of the university.

C - Demonstration of competency by the student which may lead to the awarding of direct or "retro-credit" (a concept which will be explained below.)

The primary function of these tests in the U.W. System is for accurate and effective placement of students. Placement in a course is based on the premise that the student is ready to learn in that course. Students who are properly placed in a course, it is assumed, will generally be more prepared to learn the material presented in that course. Conversely, students who do not have the prerequisite knowledge for a course will tend to do less well at learning the material in the course than will the students who do have the knowledge.

From a student's perspective, it is far more desirable to be placed into a course for which one is prepared to learn than it is to be in a course for which one is either over - or under-prepared. If the learning demands of the course do not match the student's level of preparation, the student is likely to be either bored (due to being over-prepared) or frustrated and possibly somewhat anxious (from being under-prepared).

As teachers, we too have a stake in the matter. We want students to be able to learn from our instruction. We do not want to see students either bored or frustrated in our courses because their preparation does not match the prerequisite. We maximize this fit between our instruction and their preparation by proper placement.

Placement testing is used primarily with students who have elected courses in the department and/or with students who are required to take a communication course at some level . Where the student is required to pass a specific course for graduation, but is not then required to go on to a more advanced level in its place, the issue of waiver or exemption comes into play.

Waiver/exemption can occur when the student demonstrates a level of competency commensurate with students satisfactorally EXITING the class. The cut-off score for waiver/exemption is not necessarily the same as the cut-off score for placement in an advanced section.

Many University of Wisconsin institutions require a communication course for all students as part of the core-liberal arts curriculum, and these campuses are planning to use the tests for the purpose of exempting some students from that course without necessarily being able to place them in more advanced courses. The student "should" go on to a more advanced course, but there is nothing that says s/he "must."

An approach is being taken by some of our campuses, and explored by others, which attempts to bridge this gap between "should" and "must" for students who perform well on this battery of tests. The incentive is called "retro-credit."

A student earning placement in Speech or Interpersonal Communication II can receive the additional credit for Course I by performing at a designated level in Course II. An "A" earned in Course II brings with it the 3 semester credits for Course I, also with a grade of "A". If the department says that a "C" is not sufficient for retro-credit, then the student still gets the 3 credits of "C" for Course II, but no additional credit is awarded. "Retro-credit" provides an incentive for students who perform well on the test to continue on in the field.

Campuses may elect to use this battery of tests for any or all of these purposes by adjusting their cut-off scores for their individual purposes and needs.

Public Speaking Test

Each campus of the University of Wisconsin System has its own Basic Communication Course, or courses. It is doubtful that any two of them are the same. Some operate in the traditional public address mold and focus entirely on public speaking and even these vary in their content. Some, for example, contain work on introductions, some do not; some have a unit on the speech to entertain, some do not; some focus on the direct:indirect dichotomy in persuasion, some organize persuasion around the proposition-to-proof, problem-to-solution and two-sided reflective formats, etc.

What this group of campuses has in common, however, is that their course deals solely in public speaking. For these campuses, there is a 42-question sequence that examines the student's comprehension of areas covering both basic rhetorical theory and generic practical procedures of informative and persuasive speaking. These areas are:

1) Appropriate Topic Selections
2) Organizational Skills
3) Audience Adaptation and Feedback
4) Delivery
5) Language
6) Reasoning and Logic
7) Analysis
8) Credibility
9) Listening
10) Ethics
11) Sequencing of Speech Preparation

Some of these areas overlap and some of the questions are relevant to more than one area.

Interpersonal Communication Test.

For some campuses, the "Basic Course" is interpersonal communication. That course has as many different approaches, organizations, contexts and sets of exercise as you have instructors to teach it. There do, however, seem to be some basic competencies and concepts that virtually all of these courses and approaches have in common. There is a separate 42-question sequence that examines the student's comprehension of interpersonal communication theory.

Areas examined in this questions pool are:

1) Fundamental Axioms of Interpersonal Communication
2) Initiating, Maintaining and Terminating Conversations
3) Language
4) Nonverbal Communication
5) Self-Concept and Self-Disclosure
6) Empathy and Situational Sensitivity
7) Trust, Persuasion and Motivation
8) Perception
9) Group Consensus
10) Conflict Management
11) Styles of Interaction

Again, as in the Public Speaking Test, some of these areas are complementary. Campuses have the option of using the Interpersonal Communication Theory section in isolation, if they so choose.

Use of Both Tests Together

Several campuses have a "hybrid" course, like the course at UW-Superior which is called "Introduction to Speech Communication." This course covers the broad field. It spends substantial time on both interpersonal communication, and public speaking. For campuses with similar courses, the obvious choice is to administer both sections with a total of 84 questions. The computer based structure of the exam allows segmentation, differentiation and intermixing of the exam sections, as desired by each campus. Specific groups of questions can be broken out for scoring, as needed.

In summary then, we have a 42-question test on public speaking principles and practices which may be used in isolation, or in combination with a 42-question test on interpersonal communication principles and practice. A campus which wishes to test for placement in a hybrid course, or which offers a full array of courses and wishes to test for placement in both areas may choose to use them together. The combined total of 84 questions is not too long for use as part of a "battery" for incoming freshmen students.

OPTIONS FOR ADMINISTERING TEST(S)

Public speaking and interpersonal communication sections of questions have been developed for paper and pencil stimulus and response. In addition a videotape stimulus with a paper and pencil response is being developed. This phase will be discussed in another paper in this program. In utilizing the test campuses would have a choice of formats:

1 - They could have the students take the paper and pencil stimulus test at an existing regional testing center and then evaluate the results locally, making no use of videotape stimulus testing.

2 - They could administer the paper and pencil stimulus test on campus with no videotape stimulus testing.

3 - They can use the paper and pencil stimulus test AND the videotape stimulus test for evaluation of the student's theoretical knowledge.
NOTE: The theory knowledge tests are intended to serve as a "gatekeeper" to the oral performance test sections. Satisfactory performance on this phase of the Placement Test would be a prerequisite for proceding to the performance phase.

4 - A campus could also decide to forego the "gatekeeper" function and use the paper and pencil theory test segments PLUS the performance segment for ALL students.

Interpretation of Scores

One of the major concerns in administering this test is in the interpretation of test scores. All students attending participating University of Wisconsin campuses will take the same tests. Once the scores are returned to the individual campuses from the regional testing centers (or scored locally), they need to be interpreted in terms of course placement decisions. Since each campus has its own course sequence, the cut-off scores for placement and/or exemption will need to be tailored by and for each individual campus. It is necessary, therefore, to work individually with the faculty on each participating campus or develop a set of guidelines for interpreting these test scores.

While the tests may be TAKEN locally or in Regional Testing Centers, the SCORING is either done intially, or is replicated, in a central computer in Madison. There is, therefore, cumulative data available for each campus on statewide-systemwide responses to each test, each segment of each test and each question. There will be an ample statistical foundation for the setting of both prudent and flexible guidelines for placement and exemption.

Updating and Securing Test(s)

It is important that the first form of the speech placement test not also be the last. Test development work for a placement testing program is not a one-time thing. After the first form of the placement test is developed, the work on monitoring the effectiveness of the first form and also development of subsequent forms needs to begin.

For a testing program to remain useful, it must be continually monitored and updated. As soon as this monitoring ceases, the program begins to decline in usefulness with respect to the placement decision process.

The development of new forms to replace old ones is important for a number of reasons. One primary reason for developing new forms of the placement test is that course content changes, and consequently, so do course entrance requirements. As new information is added to the base of knowledge in an area, courses change. No area of scholarly inquiry is static for even a short period of time. It is important that the members of the Placement Test Development Committee stay continually aware of shifting trends in their areas of expertise and also how these trends affect course content on their individual campuses.

There is of course, another vital reason for the constant evolution of test materials, and that is security. The security of a test is compromised whenever that form is used. In order for placement tests to be an effective tool in the placement process, students cannot have access to them prior to the administration date. Once the test has been administered, the questions have been seen by all who took it. Those persons tell their friends, albeit rarely with any malicious intent, and the security of the form is compromised. Whenever possible, therefore, the items of the test need to be revised and, if necessary, replaced on a regular basis. The addition and revision of questions, combined with randomization of sequencing, also serves to avoid this problem.

Of course, a major concern of every person who handles the test materials must be avoiding the sudden breach of security through loss or theft. Careless handling of the test materials on one campus can compromise their use throughout the entire system, necessitating the development of a whole new series of questions.

In combination with the videotape stimulus and performance tests, the use of this battery of paper and pencil theory tests provides the U.W. System with a consistent, accurate and reasonable gauge of student readiness for learning in the area of communication. The committee will be ready to do our final testing this year and hope to have the full battery in place for the fall of 1986.